

Great leap forward

Tough legislation and a lot of money have been needed to save one of Europe's rarest small mammals. **Nigel Williams** reports.

One of Europe's rarest small mammals — the flying squirrel — has been given a boost to save it from extinction, sparing the Finnish government from legal action by the European Commission.

The Finnish government has changed its law to protect the squirrels and paid out one million euros in compensation to about 400 farmers and landowners who have to curb normal activities for the squirrels' safety.

After a lengthy battle over the plight of the protected species the European Commission has dropped the threat of legal action against Finland amid signs that the flying squirrel population is now viable.

Apart from Finland, Estonia is the only EU country with a flying squirrel population and only a few hundred are thought to exist there. The species has disappeared from Latvia and Lithuania, countries in which it once thrived.

The first comprehensive survey, conducted last year, produced an estimate of around 143,000 females nesting in Finland. That, however, is a big reduction on the numbers half a century ago. According to the study by researcher, Ilpo Hanski, "all surveys suggest the population was many times greater 50–60 years ago. The number of flying squirrels now is small by comparison," he says. "No areas have been found where the population would have remained stable, or grown."

Forestry has eaten away at the flying squirrels' habitat. The mammals prefer well-established mixed forests with spruce trees — forests that have been felled since the 1960s.

The plight of the flying squirrel highlights the constant battle

between conservationists and other human pressures on natural resources and habitats. The Finnish Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) were keen to remove the flying squirrel from the European Union's nature directive, aimed at strengthening protection for threatened species, noting that the population appeared larger than previously estimated.

"The new estimate on the number of flying squirrels calls for a re-evaluation of the methods used in protection," said Markku Tornberg, of the MTK.

But Heikki Korpelainen of the Finnish environment ministry notes that protection of the flying squirrel is being strengthened not because of absolute numbers but because of the major decline.

"The study has confirmed the perception of the spotted nature of the area of distribution. On the basis of this information, it would not be justified to remove the flying squirrel from the nature directive, or from the list of endangered species," he said.



Gliding on: The endangered European flying squirrel received a boost when Finland agreed new conservation measures. (Photo: Konrad Wothe/Photolibrary.)